

Holiness of God (Toronto Spiritual Life Convention 1999)

by Eric J. Alexander

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding and grasping the concept of God's holiness, which is His infinite separation from us, His uniqueness, and His moral glory.

Duration: 51:43

Topics: "Knowing God", "Holiness Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that serving God is not a substitute for knowing God. He explains that knowing God is the qualification for serving Him. The speaker also discusses the importance of growing in the knowledge of God and how it is central to biblical salvation and eternal life. The sermon focuses on the revelation of God's holiness and the reaction to His holiness, highlighting the need for individuals to have a deep understanding of God's character.

Transcript

Well, it is a great pleasure to see you here this evening, and it's also, to me, coming from Scotland, where they don't make them so hardy as in Canada. It's something of a surprise, because with the kind of scare stories that I've been listening to from time to time about the weather, I really thought we might have been meeting upstairs in one of the rooms there. But it's a blessing to see you, and it is a blessing to me to be here.

I am amazed at how kindness and grace multiplied in the person of Brian Ross can make him even contort the truth to suggest to you that I was doing you a favor by coming here. Coming to Toronto is, for me, a piece of sheer self-indulgence, and I am deeply grateful for the privilege of it. Now, last evening, we were considering, by way of introduction, the general theme of growing in the knowledge of God, which is, of course, a quotation from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians at verse 10.

It's clear from Scripture that biblical salvation and eternal life consist in knowing God. This is life eternal, Jesus says, as He prays to the Father in John 17. This is life eternal, that they might know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

So, the nature of eternal life is knowing God. And growing in grace really is growing to know Him better. And that is what we are concerned with during the three evenings of this week.

We are seeking to come to know God more fully. And last evening, we thought together about the theme of the sovereignty of God from Acts chapter 4. And this evening, our theme is the holiness of God, as you would have guessed from our Scripture reading in Isaiah chapter 6. The adjective holy is one that is used of God probably more than any other adjective in the Bible. It is the name by which God is identified.

He is the Holy One, the Holy One of Israel or the Holy One, high and exalted. And that title is peculiar to Isaiah, although not exclusive to him. But Isaiah, probably deriving from this vision of God in chapter 6, which clearly occurred somewhere at the earliest beginnings of his ministry, such was the effect and impact of this revelation of God to him that God almost naturally became the Holy One in Isaiah's vocabulary.

But Jesus also teaches us, when He is teaching us to pray, He teaches us that our first petition needs to be that God our Father's name will be hallowed, that is made and declared and recognized to be holy. And of course it is the way God describes Himself in the book of Leviticus chapter 11 and verse 44. Be holy because I am holy.

And yet the concept of God's holiness is one that it is difficult for us to come to grips with. And I think part of the reason for that may well be that to say that God is holy is really just to describe the essence of His being so that one great Old Testament scholar who quite incidentally came from Scotland, Professor A.B. Davidson, says that to speak of God as holy is just to call Him by the name of God. But it may also be that the essence of the meaning of the word is separation or apartness.

And when Isaiah in this passage sees God, he sees Him exalted and lifted high, and afterwards he describes Him as the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity. There is a sense in which God's holiness is what sets Him apart from everything that we can begin to grasp or understand. There is a sense in which we may be able to understand a little more of the idea of God being sovereign than God being holy.

We know what power is and we can begin to understand a little of absolute power which belongs alone to God. But absolute righteousness and perfect purity and moral glory are things to which we are strangers in the deepest sense. And it becomes difficult for us to conceptualize the holiness and glory of God.

You notice the seraphim call one to the other, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory. Now, there are two parts to the word for holiness in the Bible.

One of them is this word separation. But the other meaning of the Hebrew word is a burning, a shining. And it's there that when men see the glory of God, they have to hide their faces from it.

And the whole idea of God's holiness therefore becomes something that it's difficult for us truly to grasp. But the concept of the holiness of God is nowhere more fully expounded in the Bible than it is by the prophet Isaiah. It's he who speaks again and again of God's holiness of His name as the Holy One of Israel.

And as I say, a great deal of this may derive from this experience which was our Bible reading this evening in Isaiah chapter 6. And I want us to come to this passage for the rest of our time and to seek by God's grace that whatever redeemed sinners may understand and grasp of the holiness of God, we may grasp it together as we submit our hearts and minds to God's Word. How gracious of Him it is, do you ever think, that He begins to allow us to see even some slight measure of His true glory and His holiness. And it is to that that we turn together now this evening.

There are two things that this passage sets before us. And you may find it helpful to see it in these two areas. It speaks to us about the revelation of God's holiness which Isaiah certainly received.

And it speaks to us also about the reaction to God's holiness. Not only here in the temple, but as Isaiah listens to the voice of God, Whom shall I send and who will go for us? Let's look together then first of all at the revelation of God's holiness. There are three things about this revelation which you will notice as you look at your Bible with me.

The first is its timing. Now you will notice that Isaiah obviously wants us to understand something of when this happened. And there is a significance in this.

It is in the year that King Uzziah died that he says, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. The place where this revelation took place was in the temple. Isaiah was clearly there worshipping God.

And suddenly, the veil began to disappear and something of the infinite wonder of the glory of God broke through. Now there is a shadow of that that we frequently discover, do we not? In God's infinite mercy, when we are gathered together for worship, have there not been times when you have experienced that there broke through from another world something of the indescribable glory of God, and you were rendered almost speechless by it? And this I think is something of what happened in Isaiah's experience. It happened at the time when Uzziah, it was the year when King Uzziah died.

King Uzziah is someone of whom you can learn in the second book of Chronicles, but King Uzziah came to the throne in the aftermath of the reign of his father. Now his father was a man of whom second Chronicles tells us he followed the Lord, but not wholeheartedly. And his whole life and his reign and his impact was that dreadful thing for any godly man to discover that his life was an anticlimax.

And the horror of it was that somehow or other the same thing happened to his son. Uzziah became king when he was just a boy of sixteen, and he reigned for half a century. There is no question whatsoever that Uzziah's reign was probably the nearest thing to Solomon's that they had had.

It was a reign full of obedience to God in his earliest days, of an attention to the things of God. He came to the throne with such advantages. He had been taught by Zechariah.

Not entirely sure who that Zechariah is, whether it was a priestly figure or the king or whoever. But he was taught, schooled, wearied in the fear of God. And Uzziah was brought up to have priorities in his life and central concerns in his life.

He was a man who shone with righteousness in his generation. And he sent out his armies and God gave them amazing victories. But you know we read the most extraordinary thing about King Uzziah and you read it in chapter 26 of 2 Chronicles.

Let me just read it to you. One of the problems about studying 2 Chronicles is finding it, isn't it? So here it is in 2 Chronicles 26 verse 16. The verse before.

He was greatly helped Uzziah. He was greatly helped until he became powerful. He was marvelously helped says the authorized version until he became strong.

And although it's not always true that all power corrupts as Lord Acton said, it's true that frequently a lust for power corrupts. And my dear friends, there are some times when a lust for spiritual power can corrupt. If it's divorced from the glory of God.

And the message of Uzziah's life was precisely this. You know of course perhaps how he finished his life. He finished his life separated.

Not separated unto God, but separated from God and from society hidden away as a leper. And it was without question a mark of the judgment of God upon him. And Uzziah left a message for the people of Israel.

And the message was you cannot divorce the power of God from the glory of God. You learned that message. It's a very important one to learn especially for anybody who is in the service of God.

These are two things that God has married together. And no one divorces them with impunity. To Him belong, we finish the Lord's Prayer, the power and the glory.

And Uzziah died in that year. And there was a great sense of sadness over the nation. They had put their confidence and their trust, so many of them, in this man.

And when Isaiah comes into the temple, God shows him where true glory is to be found. And it's probably partly for that reason that one of the great burdens that was on Isaiah's soul to the end of his days was for the glory and honor of God. That He might be exalted amongst His people.

That the glory might be exclusively His. And he had that vision that day in the year that King Uzziah died. He saw the Lord high and lifted up.

So the timing seemed to be of some considerable importance. Here's the description of what he saw secondly. It's not really clear how Isaiah is speaking to us about what he saw because there is something difficult always.

Have you noticed this? About the description of the glory of God. In the Bible you will discover that people are told you cannot look upon God and live. Now that's not because God is some fractious divine being who does not like people to look upon Him.

It is because the burning glory of God's nature and character is such that when we look upon Him, that glory would burn us up. And it's a mark perhaps of how little we are aware of God's holiness that we often find it possible to come into His presence so casually and sometimes almost frivolously, you know. When Isaiah comes into the presence of God in the year that King Uzziah died, he says, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.

Now, the next thing you expect is that he's going to describe God to us. I saw the Lord, he says. Now, what does he say to us? Well, he says, the train of His robe filled the temple.

That's all. It's rather like that group of elders in Israel who came into the presence of God, do you remember in Exodus 24? And when they came into God's presence, we read, they saw God. They asked if they might see Him and they saw God.

And the next thing we want to say to them is, what did you see then? And you know what the answer is in Exodus 24.10? The pavement under His feet was sapphire. And that's all we saw, they said. Now, it is of

the infinite tender mercy of God, you see, that He shields us from the burning glory which, beloved, in our fallenness, we could not even stand.

And of course, it's very significant that when you come to see what happened in the temple, there are various ways in which the holiness of God is described to us. These seraphim who are there, do you notice the language that is used by them is the language of an infinitely separated God from us. Now, you see, it is this that is the background of that ultimate mystery of all history and of the whole universe, that the Lord Jesus Christ, by the shedding of His blood and the breaking down of the middle wall of partition, not only between Jew and Gentile, but between God and sinners, has brought us into His presence and given us access to Him.

Now, the reason that access is so utterly mysterious is that not only Isaiah, but the very seraphim, the unfallen creation, when they come into God's presence, do you know what they do above Him? In the temple were seraphs, each with six wings. Now, there is a huge significance in these wings and what they do with them. With two wings they covered their faces.

Do you notice that? Even the unfallen creatures who are here, because the seraphs are angelic beings, they never knew what it was to plunge into the abyss of our fallenness. They are created by God and are an unfallen creation, but even they shield their faces. Angels and archangels come into the presence of God like this.

And you notice the second thing they do with their wings is to cover their feet with two of them. Professor Edward Young says that this is a mark of humility and modesty and a recognition of the infinite purity and glory of God before whom they stand and they cover their faces and they cover their feet and with two of their wings they fly to do His bidding. That's the point of their flight.

They are given motability to run to serve God. And they sing. They call to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty.

Now the word that they use, of course, is that very word we were speaking about a moment ago which has these two ideas of God infinitely separated from us. Dr. Packer says that the word holy expresses everything that puts God apart from ourselves and makes Him unique. It is what puts God above us and makes Him exalted and worshipful.

And it expresses this uniqueness of God's being. In the light of that, of course, is it not an amazing thing that one of the contexts in which God says to us, I am holy, He says, is when He addresses His people and says, Now you also are to be holy. Do you ever read that and say, Almighty God, how could that ever be? But God says, That's what the gospel is designed to produce.

More of that in a little while. But they cry, not just once, they cry, Holy, Holy, Holy. Now there's a reason for that.

And the reason for it belongs to the nature of the Hebrew language. Some of you may know that the Hebrew language doesn't possess an intensifying form for an adjective like this. You know, we have intensifying forms.

Good, better, best is intensifying. We say something is good, that's better, this is best. We say something is holy, that is holier, this is holiest of all.

But when Hebrew writers were seeking to express something which was the ultimate, they repeated the word. They did it twice. For example, do you remember when Jesus speaking in Aramaic was saying to people, Truly I say to you, and wanted to intensify that.

He says, Truly, truly I say to you. And it's a repetition for the purpose of intensification. But you know the only place in the whole of the Old Testament where a word is repeated and repeated again and appears three times over is here in relation to the holy being and character of God.

Holy, holy, holy, they cry, is the Lord Almighty. So this picture of the sovereign God who is lofty and high and seated upon a throne, do you notice again precisely what we discovered last night? They are taken up with God as the Exalted One who sits on the throne of the universe on whom the government of the entire universe rests. But in His nature and character, He is a holy sovereign.

He is the Lord Almighty. And then notice, the whole earth is full of His glory. That is, there is not a container that can contain the glory of God.

The whole earth is full of it. And the significance of this is that that word is a close ally, indeed it is in some ways a description of the word holy. You often discover in the Bible that you can understand words by the company that they keep.

And the idea of God's holiness and God's glory come together because the glory of God is the outshining, the burning reality of His character and being. It is very significant, I think, that the word glory originally referred to weight in terms of the heaviness of something. And you know the idea of that of course was that people in ancient times measured value by weight.

It still happens in parts of India. One of my dearest friends in this North American continent is studying at Reformed Seminary at the moment and is a converted Hindu. And he tells me that still in India they have an annual celebration where they measure the riches of a particular nobleman by his weight in gold that he possesses.

So they measure him in a scale and the gold in another scale and see whether his riches weigh down one side. You will know this, you ladies, when your husband tells you, my dear, you are worth your weight in gold. It's the very idea.

And what it means is somebody is worth an enormous amount because he is weighed against the gold. Now the idea of glory is this. It is the weight, the weight of the worth of God.

And so when people worship Him, what do they cry? Worthy art Thou, O Lord, to be honored and adored and blessed and served because He alone is worthy. Now His glory is the expression of the riches and wonder of His being that cause men and angels to cover their faces. And it is because it's like the bright shining of the sun.

You get a slight element of it from these bright lights that shine to my right and left. You get something more of it when you see the sun on a clear and glorious blue sky and you dare to look up at it. And an ophthalmic physician would tell you, don't do that.

You'll damage your eyes. Don't do anything to the sun, but you'll damage your eyes because the glory is something that you can't bear. Now my dear friends, the eternal God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ bears this infinite holy glory.

And I tell you, we need to come to know Him in His character. Oh, of course, blessed be His holy name. He is our Father in Jesus Christ.

He is our friend by His reconciling grace. He is our indwelling Savior. But I tell you, He is a God whose glory is so blindingly wonderful that we need to discover even something of what the unfallen creation discovered.

Now do you notice beyond that there is another reaction to the infinite wonder of the glory and holiness of God? And that comes from the non-rational creation. The unfallen creation cover their faces, they cover their feet, they cry out to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory.

Now at the sound of that antithonal chant, the door posts and thresholds of the temple shook and the place was filled with smoke. That is undoubtedly a reference back to Sinai and to the presence of God and the thunder and the glory and the smoke that went up which signified God's presence. But here what is happening is that even if the rational creation doesn't understand what is happening as God manifests Himself to them, the irrational creation, the non-rational creation, heaves under their feet.

I was in San Francisco last year in the spring and people were telling me what it was like when some of them recollected one of the great earthquakes there. They said we are standing on the ground and the whole ground seemed to seethe under our feet and the trembling went from one end of our district to the other and door posts in the houses began to tremble and collapse. Now it was like that here.

The temple of God began to know this undermining of its very being. Now what was happening? Well I think what was happening was that the non-rational creation was responding to the infinite moral glory of God which was manifested in the temple and the whole place seemed to be coming down upon them. And it was the singing that did it, you know.

But it wasn't just the singing. Let me comfort the choir. It was who they were singing about.

But if that was the reaction of the unfallen creation and of the non-rational creation, notice in verse 5 what is the reaction of the fallen creation represented by Isaiah. The temple was filled with smoke and then he cries, Woe to me, I cried. I am ruined.

You know what I think might have happened to him in the modern Christian world? Somebody would have put their arm around his shoulder and said, Now there's no need for you to get upset, my brother. You're taking things to a bit of extreme. But you know, it's interesting that in chapter 5, all through chapter 5, Isaiah has been pronouncing woes on other people.

You notice that? Verse 8, Woe to you who add house to house and joins field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land talking about injustice. Verse 11, Woe to those who rise early in the morning. Do I hear some of you say Amen? To run after their drinks, to stay up late at night till they're inflamed with wine he's talking about.

Their drunkenness. Verse 18, Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit. Verse 20 and 21 and 22, Isaiah is pronouncing woes upon the whole population.

But you know, when he has come into the presence of God and when he has had the manifestation of God's infinite glory and his burning holiness, the only place where he can look as he cries woe is into his

own heart. Woe is me. And you know, this vision has produced in him genuine godly humility.

He has become aware of his ruination in the presence of a holy God. I am a man of unclean lips. He is clearly in deep distress of soul.

And there is one overwhelming reason for it. It is the defilement of his own sin brought into the presence of the pure burning holiness of God. Now if you think of it, the area in which he focuses his attention might seem to us again an exaggeration.

Here is a man who is rather upset by what he has seen and he says, I am a man of unclean lips. But you see, he has been serving God, Isaiah, already. I don't think this occasion in chapter 6 comes before he has served God at all.

Verse chapters 1 to 5 suggests that is not so. And the vehicle by which Isaiah was serving God, he was a preacher, was his lips. And he is most deeply conscious of the defilement of his own sin, especially in this particular area.

And it is of great significance that when the seraph flew with a live call from the altar, he says to him, See, this has touched your lips. The place where God had brought a sense of utter ruination. And the reason for it is, my eyes, he says, have seen the King.

Why is it that he is so upset? He says, my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. You know, we don't really know ourselves or see ourselves until we have come to know God in some measure like that. Oswald Sanders, do you remember he of the China Inland Mission and then of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship who has written a number of outstanding books and lived to a great old age and served God to the very end of them.

I often say to my wife, if I live to grow really old, I would like to grow old like Oswald Sanders. Oswald Sanders once said, When one reads of the Puritans mourning over their sin, we can only conclude that either they were very wicked men or we are very superficial Christians. Do you know the story of Quasimodo in Notre Dame? How Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, you know, how he took this lovely girl and carried her up into the upper areas of Notre Dame.

And there as he took her up, he sheltered her showing a gentleness that was quite beautiful at times. And he stared at her and continued to stare at her in the story. And as he stared at her, suddenly she discovered that he was weeping.

Oh, she said, have I upset you? And he said, no. But it was not until I saw how beautiful you were that I realized how ugly I am. That's what Isaiah has grasped.

I am ruined, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Now Isaiah's experience of the holiness of God had brought him to the place where he was utterly undone. But do you notice the altogether amazing thing that happened? God not only displays His holiness and manifests and reveals His glory.

When he finds Isaiah in the situation where he cries out, I am ruined. What he does then, do you notice, is to take hold of one of his servants, this seraph, and to take the coal from off the altar and to place it upon Isaiah's lips and the place where he was most deeply conscious of the ruination that the vision of God had brought to him. And he cleanses him.

Notice, I am a man of unclean lips. And when the seraph flew to him with the live coal from the altar, some think that it was perhaps part of the charred sacrifice. And he takes this object of atonement and he burns it, applies it into Isaiah's lips and says, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.

Now, my dear friends, this is the most amazing thing in the world. That everything that sin had done to Isaiah, God by His atoning grace in Jesus Christ, and we will learn rather more of this tomorrow when we think of the grace of God. He has provided for the cleansing of this ruined servant of His for one very specific purpose.

And that is that he might be a partaker of God's holiness. Now, that's something the New Testament tells us a great deal about. Can you grasp this? That the eternal God means not just to display the glory of His holiness, not merely to bring home the ruination that sin has brought, but so to lay hold of this poor broken sinner and to impart His holiness to him.

Even that glory which would have burned the eyes out of these seraphim. That glory God means to give not to angels, but to ransomed sinners. Do you remember John 17? That's a chapter we need to read and read and reread by the way.

Jesus says, The glory that you have given Me. Now that's the glory He prays about at the beginning of John 17 and says, Father, give me the glory that I had with you before the world began. And then He says, The glory you have given to Me, I have given to them.

And the Apostle Paul takes up the theme and says, As we gaze into the glory of the Lord, we are being changed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. Can you think about that? These ordinary clay casks in which God has been pleased to take up His dwelling, they become the vehicle of the very glory of God in Jesus Christ shining through our lives. Now there are some of the characteristics, the attributes as they call them of God, which we shall never bear of course.

His omnipotence we will never share. His omniscience that He knows everything we shall never share. But my dear friends, the greatest mystery of life to me is that the eternal God means us to share His holiness.

He means that something of that glory is to be seen in ransomed sinners like you and me. Now it was at this point that Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord. He had a purpose for the nations and for the nations far beyond this nation because it is very significant that the Apostle Paul in Acts 28 and the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13 quotes the rest of this passage in Isaiah 6 speaking about the ministry that God has given to Isaiah.

And Isaiah comes and knows that God has some purpose. Do you know what the purpose is? The purpose is that something of His glory may be seen by those whose eyes have hitherto been blinded to it. And he says, Who will go for us? Whom shall I send? Do you know the best translation I know of what Isaiah says? He doesn't put up his hand and say, I'm your man.

What he actually says is, Well, here am I. Will I do? Will I do? And God says, Go. Go. Do you know the whole point about that? And with this I'm finished.

The whole point about that is that serving God is never a substitute for knowing God. It is knowing God that is the qualification for serving God. And that's why God said, You'll do, my boy.

You'll do. The world badly needs men and women who know God. Let's pray together.

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